THE UNIVERSAL FELLOWSHIP OF METROPOLITAN COMMUNITY CHURCHES

# ALERT

News from the UFMCC
on AIDS Legislation, Education, Research and Treatment.

April 1994

## Rev. Elder Tan Looks at HIV/AIDS in Manila

MCC in Manilla, the Philippines, received their first official UFMCC visit from Rev. Elder Hong Tan. As liaison elder, Rev. Tan spent February 28 through March 3 sharing with the church and its pastor, Rev. Dr. Richard Mickley. During his visit, he had opportunity to learn about how Manila is experiencing HIV/AIDS.

The number of diagnosed HIV/AIDS cases is relatively low. "Under 100 people have been diagnosed in Manila, or so I was told," says Rev. Elder Tan. "There could be potentially 150,000 to 200,000 infected." Such large numbers are projected because of the sex industry (with workers of both genders) which has been built up in Manila, like in Bangkok. There are many heterosexual men working as sex workers for relatively low money, so it would seem that there will be an explosion of HIV cases in both the homosexual and heterosexual populations.

*Jomar Flores and Rev. Elder Tan*

Rev. Tan reports that an organization called "Reach Out" is the primary means of educating the people of Manila about the transmission of HIV. Reach Out has educated many persons in the sex industry about the importance and use of condoms. The organization also goes out to places where men have sex with men. For instance, Rev. Tan explains that cinemas are a very popular place where men meet men who don't identify as gay. Reach Out organizes their cinema outreach program with the cinema manager, and then go into the cinemas and sit and talk with the men. They advocate testing, have the men sign consent forms, and they take blood for testing at the cinema. This will be one of the largest surveys of men who have sex with men that has ever been conducted.

*(HIV/AIDS in Mania, on page 3)*

## MCC's Rev. Ralph Lasher, Executive Director of Montrose Clinic

Rev. Ralph Lasher, a volunteer member of the clergy staff of MCC of the Resurrection in Houston, TX, U.S.A., serves as Executive Director of the Montrose Clinic in Houston. The mission of Montrose Clinic "is to develop and conduct research, education, prevention, treatment and service programs concerned with sexual behaviors and sexually transmitted diseases which will be available and fully accessible to the community."

Rev. Lasher was an Episcopal priest who was forced out of that church 35 years ago for being gay. While a priest, he served Episcopal parishes in the New York City area. During his last three years as a priest, he lived openly with his lover (they have now been together almost 40 years) in the rectory next door to the church. Lasher reports there were few problems in socializing as a couple with members of the New Jersey parish. It was when he came out to his bishop, that he was forced to resign.

Twenty-eight years later, Lasher was working as the AIDS program manager for the Montrose Clinic. While counseling a young man who had tested HIV-positive, and who had been expelled from a seminary because of his sexual orientation, Ralph told his own story, and for the first time felt drawn

*(Montrose Clinic, on page 3)*

# An Hour With The AIDS Czar

## By Rev. Lewis Broyles

"I cannot stress enough the need to meet with our religious leaders, and influence them to do the morally right thing when it comes to HIV/AIDS," said Kristine Gebbie, in her recent Milwaukee visit. In the city to address a luncheon gathering of AIDS service organizations, she came to our workplace early in the morning to spend two hours, one with faculty, the other with staff.

My secular job is as a Research Associate with the Community Health Behavior Program/Medical College of Wisconsin (MCW). This goes beyond being an educator in our community. It's more exact than that. It is utilizing every creative bone in my body to assist in coming up with an actual intervention that will re-shape individual decisions to use condoms, stay safe, and change behavior. The grant that funds us is from the National Institute of Mental Health through MCW. The leading investigator is psychologist Jeffrey A. Kelley, Ph.D.

Kristine Gebbie is a very warm person, and quickly said she remembered Rev. Steve Pieters from the White House meal they shared, when she was told I was clergy in UFMCC. "You'd be surprised at some of the clergy that are coming forward in support," she said. "Some that I never thought I'd see. They'll say, 'Don't push me on the issue of homosexuality and Scripture -- but don't think we are not here to help.'" Most of those clergy have had a congregant or family member contract HIV/AIDS; thus, they're having to deal with it whether they like it or not.

I found myself saying to her, "Hang in there; I know you get it from both sides. On the one hand, you're criticized for having anything to do with Gay/Lesbian people and on the other, you're criticized for having anything to do with the religious zealots. It can be very lonely," I said. "Having worked briefly while pastoring in Jackson, Mississippi with the Episcopal, Catholic, and Methodist Bishops, it can get you down, but you really can accomplish a lot if you just hang in there."

*Rev. Lewis Broyles and Kristine Gebbie*

She went on to stress that prevention held the greatest hope for combating HIV/AIDS in the immediate future. ▼

# Ten Years With AIDS And Still Dancing

## By Rev. Steve Pieters

On April 4, 1994 I observe the 10th anniversary of my diagnosis of lymphoma, Kaposi's Sarcoma and AIDS. At that point I had already been sick for almost two years with what we now know as HIV disease. In 1985, both the lymphoma and Kaposi's Sarcoma went into complete remission while I was on the experimental drug, suramin. Suramin is no longer used against HIV because of severe toxic side effects.

Ten years later, I daily give glory and thanks to God for the miracle of being well. I like to point out that this miracle did not happen to an "ex-homosexual." But I also wonder why there haven't been more miracles of recovery like mine. True, there are others, like Ralph Masek and Kristofer Shihar. But if God has blessed us with such miracles, why haven't there been miracles for so many others?

It's a question I have struggled with for years, and one I will continue to ask. I am faced with the question every time a mother or lover of someone who has died from AIDS approaches me with the anger of their losses. I ask myself that question every time I hear of another death, or attend yet another memorial service.

Meanwhile, I will continue to celebrate life, to laugh and to dance. I still live with HIV in my body. I have no guarantees about tomorrow. But I never did have a guarantee about tomorrow, even before I was diagnosed with AIDS. All any of us have is this moment.

In this moment, I am stunned by God's amazing grace. As I look back at ten years of living with AIDS, and twelve years of living with HIV disease, I am amazed that I am not only still alive, but well. I remember what it was like ten years ago when I was told I had eight months to live. I remember the fear, the despair, and the grief over the life I wanted yet to live. I also remember the shock of realizing how precious life is. I remember how the colors of nature suddenly seemed so much more vivid. I remember how I cherished the feelings of love and support from my family and friends. I remember the acute yearning for life I felt. I remember the poignant joy and gratitude I felt for my Easter faith.

Although the feelings are not as intense ten years later, they are still part of the background of my emotional and spiritual life.

I've been living with HIV/AIDS for over a decade now - a quarter of my life. I find myself walking a tight rope,

*(Still Dancing, on page 4)*

# A Pastoral Letter From Rev. Susan Deitrick

*[This article is an excerpt of Rev. Deitrick's pastoral letter of January, 1994. Rev. Deitrick was Co-Pastor with Rev. C. Jane Carl of MCC Ocean of Life in Costa Mesa, CA. Rev. Deitrick is a survivor of breast cancer. Rev.'s Carl and Deitrick resigned their pastorate on March 6, 1994.]*

As I think over this past year, 1993, I have never been so happy to see a year end. It has been a time of great accomplishments, such as our powerful love force known as AIDS Team Ministry that is now feeding so many who cannot cook for themselves in our community. We have seen the budding of our new ministry of Samaritans sadly called into action with the assault of AIDS on our beautiful brother, Rev. Doug Bull. A powerful lesson came with our relationship with Doug.

Knowing he had AIDS, we dared to truly love him, let him into our hearts, and become an intimate part of our family. When we officially took him into membership over the telephone in the midst of a worship service, he in his hospital bed, we wept together - in both joy and sadness.

When Doug died Monday morning, December 6, our Samaritans had come forth in the prior two weeks, standing vigil, praying with Bruce and him, being present, even bathing him - loving him. When he died so peacefully after such a valiant struggle, our family felt the loss deeply and mourned together - as we still will for a while. Because of our resilience, though, through God's grace, we will rise to the head of the formation again, when needed, to be there for another we will love into eternity.

*(Rev. Deitrick, on page 4)*

## Montrose Clinic

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back into the ministry. He transferred his credentials to MCC, and later became Executive Director of the Montrose Clinic.

Today, he helps facilitate the Empowerment for Living HIV-support group at MCC of the Resurrection. The group meets each Tuesday evening, and this month begins weekly consideration of the 10 principles of "Spiritual Strength for Survival." The Empowerment for Living group recently sponsored a visit from Rev. Steve Pieters, who preached at MCC of the Resurrection, and lectured on Tuesday evening on "Being Fully Alive with HIV/AIDS."

The Montrose Clinic, under Rev. Lasher's direction, provides outpatient medical services primarily concerned with sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV/AIDS. Among their services, the Clinic offers the hepatitis B vaccine, the HIV antibody test, immune system evaluation, and a pentamidine program. The clinic provides medical care to outpatients of low to moderate income who can't afford private care, but who are overqualified for public health care. They also provide case management for persons living with HIV/AIDS.

Supported by grants, volunteer hours, in-kind gifts, and private donations, the Clinic was founded in 1981, and in 1985 became the first HIV antibody testing and counseling program in Texas. Today, Rev. Lasher provides calm, steady, and effective leadership not only for the Montrose Clinic, but for members of MCC of the Resurrection who are living with HIV/AIDS. ▼

## HIV/AIDS in Manila

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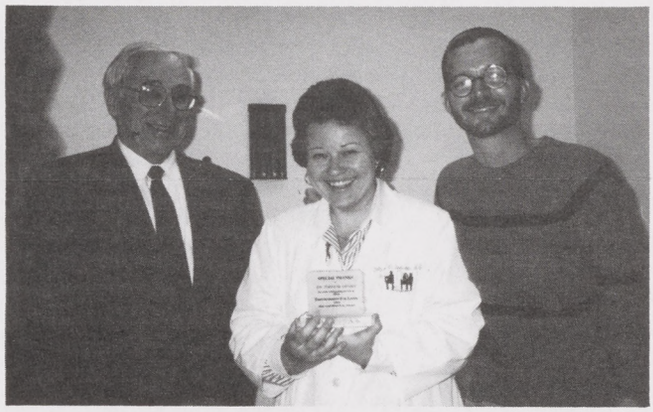
The Executive Director of Reach Out is Jomar Flores, who served on the original interim board of MCC in Manila, and remains a friend of the church. His organization received funding from the World Health Organization, among other grants, and Flores has done consultant training overseas. He wants to work with MCC in prevention efforts targeting gay men.

Rev. Elder Tan spoke at Reach Out, talking about HIV in the United Kingdom, as well as addressing MCC's unique role in the HIV/AIDS pandemic. He spoke about "the need for people in general to start listening to the spirituality of people with HIV. God is in the margins, and people with HIV are pushed into the margins." Reach Out has plans to develop a course on the integration of spirituality and sexuality for their counselors. The course will be facilitated by Rev. Dr. Mickley and others from MCC Manila. Rev. Tan will provide resources on sexuality training.

Rev. Tan told ALERT, "MCC Manila has not had any members who have had HIV. When you talk about it, it's such a new experience for them." The Vice-Moderator of the church, Edgar Mendosa, lost a friend to AIDS, and told Tan that nothing prepared him for the experience. Experiences like Mendosa's prompted the founding of Reach Out.

Rev. Elder Tan was impressed with the people of MCC in Manila. 'The church is very exciting. Most of the members are under thirty, so it's a very young church, and they have to be right upfront about prevention education. I felt a phenomenal potential. Their attitude was not 'what can MCC do for us, but what can we do for MCC?' They're very kind, gentle, and caring. And they love to sing!" ▼



*Rev. Ralph Lasher and Keith Rasberry - two co-founders of Empowerment For Living in 1988; and Patricia Salvato, M.D., recent speaker at Empowerment and one of the first HIV physicians in Houston.*

## Northwest District Begins AIDS Newsletter

Rev. Don Magill, a UFMCC clergyperson living with AIDS in Tacoma, Washington, USA, has begun publishing a monthly AIDS Newsletter for the Northwest District of UFMCC. The newsletter's mission "is to expand awareness about AIDS and other catastrophic illnesses; to support people with AIDS and the churches of the Northwest District; and to advocate basic human rights for all people."

Eternal Light MCC in Olympia, WA, is graciously donating the use of computer equipment for typesetting and layout of the newsletter, as well as covering the cost of postage and printing. The March, 1994 issue features articles about women and AIDS, breast cancer, and women's health resources.

To share news, opinions, and ideas, or to be added to the mailing list, write Rev. Don Magill, 4813 S. Yakima, Tacoma, WA, USA 98408; phone 206/474-9363. ▼

## AZT & Maternal Transmission of HIV: Questions Remain

The media has heralded the news that a cooperative study of France and the U.S. has shown that pregnant women living with HIV are less likely to have HIV-infected babies when treated with AZT. However, both "WORLD" (Women Organized to Respond to Life-Threatening Diseases) and "AIDS Treatment News" raise concerns about the study.

Preliminary results of the study indicate that 8.3% of babies were HIV-positive when both mothers and babies received AZT, while 25.5% were positive after receiving a placebo. The U.S. National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID) urges that AZT therapy "may be of substantial benefit" to the infants of HIV-infected women.

However, the study does not reveal any indicators for predicting which mothers will benefit from AZT treatment. There is also no way of knowing whether AZT will work as well for mothers during subsequent pregnancies. Concern is expressed by Rebecca Denison of WORLD that the risk of taking AZT for mothers may not be weighed as heavily as the potential benefit for the babies. According to AIDS Treatment News (#194, March 4, 1994) "There is no data available so far to tell us whether the women who had the highest viral loads were most at risk for transmitting the virus... While HIV-positive women now have more hope that transmission of the virus to their babies is preventable, the preliminary results of this study will leave many questions unanswered, particularly for women anxious to weigh the risks before deciding whether or not to become pregnant."

A further problem exists in the fact that most of the babies being born to HIV-positive women are born in countries where basic health care is difficult, if not impossible, to access. AZT may not be available, and in some countries, such as the U.S., women may not be able to afford treatment with AZT.

Further information is available through NIAID's ACTG076 Questions & Answers, by calling the AIDS Clinical Trials Information Service at 800/TRIALS-A. ▼

## Women's Health Resources

{Reprinted with permission from the Northwest District AIDS Newsletter.}

**The Women's AIDS Network**
San Francisco AIDS Foundation
P.O. Box 426182, San Francisco, CA 94142; 415/864-4376, ext. 2007.

**"Living with HIV: A Guide for Women"** This booklet is for all women living with HIV disease and AIDS. It serves as a guide, and addresses the many issues facing women and their children with HIV infection. Chapters include: Introduction, Getting Help, HIV Disease, Your Health, Sex, Children and Pregnancy, Drug Trials, Legal Affairs, and Resources. For more information and/or to order this booklet, call or write:

Impact AIDS, Inc.
3692 - 18th Street
San Francisco, CA 94110
415/861-3397 fax 515/621-3951

**National Women's Health Network**
1325 G Street NW, Washington, DC 20005; 202/347-1140

**WORLD (Women Organized to Respond to Life-Threatening Diseases)** A newsletter by and for HIV-infected women. Sliding scale suggested donation. Write to:

WORLD, P.O. Box 11535
Oakland, CA 94611
510/658-6930

## ALERT

**ALERT is a monthly newsletter containing information on AIDS Legislation, Education, Research, and Treatment. Editor: Rev. Dr. A. Stephen Pieters. For more info, write: 5300 Santa Monica Blvd., #304, Los Angeles, CA 90029.**

## Still Dancing

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balancing the joy of the miracle of being alive with the grief of having watched so many die. Ten years ago, I declared that even though I'd been diagnosed with AIDS, I could still dance. Today I'm still dancing, but my dance of life has changed. Now I'm also dancing for all my loved ones who have died. My dance is a memorial to all those with whom I have danced, who are now dancing with God. ▼

## Rev. Deitrick

*(continued from page 3)*

You see, resilience isn't just a gift freely given; it costs us the struggle of being there, sharing the burden as well as the joy, and surviving together. It is the gift of love given in the capacity each is able to give; bearing the loss each is able to bear; reaching out and holding one another and allowing the tears; trusting that God's grace truly is sufficient - no matter what. ▼